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Between Emancipation and Social Control: The Equivocal Potential of Universal Basic Income (UBI)

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Abstract

Universal Basic Income (UBI) has the potential to be an emancipatory force for good by alleviating poverty and hardship, abolishing ethically questionable means-testing, restoring effective bargaining power to the non-property-owning classes and enabling human beings to develop more fully their true potential by providing them with more real freedom. Or, if designed badly, it could end up as a token handout for a technology-displaced permanent underclass that is shunned from employment opportunities and effective political participation in a neo-feudal system. Further consolidating global inequality by pacifying the (potentially) revolutionary masses, keeping them from pursuing social justice. The paper highlights pitfalls and gives recommendations that are meant to forestall ongoing attempts to water down essential characteristics of UBI and avoid public misapprehension. Furthermore, the potential for social control inherent to welfare politics is highlighted and possible implications for basic income are outlined. Finally, the paper points out a possible goal conflict between civil society proponents of Basic Income and billionaire supporters. UBI has, astonishingly, a long history of receiving support from both traditional political camps – the Left and the Right. Leading to the question what kind of vision would prevail, in times when the lines delineating the political landscape have become blurred?
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Introduction

Technology is usually thought to be neutral. Tools, for instance, can be used to build a house or to destroy someone's home. It depends on how a technology is used, whether it is good or bad. Therefore, nuclear energy can be used to power a school, enabling children to learn, or to build weaponised warheads, bringing about death and suffering. Just as much in line with the current zeitgeist might be the question whether advances in artificial intelligence (AI) will merely deprive us of repetitive jobs, which we might be all too happy to hand over, or also of our means to pay for the food on our table. It could turn out to be a blessing – or a curse. This paper argues that basic income exhibits a similarly equivocal potential. There are utopian as well as dystopian visions. There is a Left-leaning vision of Basic Income and there is a Right-leaning vision (although it is increasingly difficult to accurately ascribe these characteristics, as addressed in this issue of *Kritische Gesellschaftsforschung*). There is an emancipatory vision and there is one that would enhance governments' ability to exercise social control. In short, as we will see, conceptual considerations on Basic Income vary greatly.

Focusing on the central premises of basic income is essential in order to grasp the fundamental differences to traditional cash transfers. "Universal, unconditional, and

individual: once properly understood these three key features make Universal Basic Income a radical departure from traditional welfare-state policies” (Widerquist, Noguera, Vanderborght, & Wispelaere, 2013, page xii). It would supposedly provide tremendous agency to wage-dependent workers by drastically enhancing their effective bargaining power: “A full Basic Income would eliminate the compulsion to work, by offering a reasonable standard of living to all, and then either leaving it up to each individual to decide whether they wished to pursue further wealth, by doing a paying job, or selling something, or whether they wished to do something else with their time” (Graeber, 2018, p. 520). It would not mean the end of work but rather the end of the obligation to work. This is a crucial difference to understand. “[...] [T]he link between the right to work and basic income is about helping to enable people to gain control of the pace and intensity of their work, and to escape from the remorseless and ecologically unsustainable dictates of labourism, i.e., a paradigm that sees only labour as economically and socially worthwhile activity deserving of mainstream social protection” (Standing, 2012, p. 34). Basic income would also put an end to the often humiliating and invasive practice of means-testing. Because everyone would receive it, there would be no stigma attached to it and there would be less envy over someone receiving it who, in the eyes of the grudging person, might deserve it less. Bureaucratic procedures involved in determining legitimacy and calculating what each individual is entitled to could in large part be abolished. “Thus, by avoiding complication and stigmatization, a universal scheme can achieve a high rate of take-up at a low information cost” (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, p. 18).

The list of alleged benefits is long. Proponents see it as a stepping stone to real freedom, but emphasise that it has to be designed in the right way. Succeeding in doing so, it may indeed lead to a very different way of life, far exceeding material expectations. “The real freedom we need to be concerned with is not just the real freedom to choose among the various bundles of goods one might wish to consume. It is the real freedom to choose among the various lives one might wish to lead. Stressing this distinction does not deprive income, or the budget-set, of its importance. But it makes it crucially important that the income should be given unconditionally to each citizen, no strings attached, that is, without any constraint other than her budget on not only what she may buy, but also on how she may use her time” (Van Parijs, 1995, p. 33). Social policy, including but not limited to basic income, therefore has the potential to have a major impact on the lives of those it affects. However, this need not necessarily be in a positive way. It can also be in the form of social control.

Potential for Social Control is inherent to Welfare Systems

William Beveridge, who played a central role in designing the British Post-World-War-II welfare state and whose name is often used synonymously with the concept of universalism, was already aware of this governing potential. “As a good liberal, [Beveridge] was first and foremost careful to avoid the risks associated with the restrictions on individual freedom that might arise from a system of state policies that is too extensive and pervasive in terms of expenditure and of areas of private life subject to regulation. He always had in mind the possibility that welfare policies can turn into forms of social control” (Benassi, 2010, p. 14). Additionally, the motivation for the implementation of policies is perhaps not limited to

altruism. Many scholars will argue that the introduction of social security systems in Germany by Bismarck at the end of the nineteenth century was, at least in part, based on ulterior motives. To Barmeyer, the motivation for a conservative leader such as Bismarck to radically advance social policy, largely stemmed from his conviction to keep the Prussian monarchy in power and to defend the social order from “equalitarian or socialist aspirations”. Plagued by the “nightmare of revolution”, he acted in a “Machiavellian” fashion without regard for ideology, partnering with anyone, to reach his aims. With “a carrot and a stick”, in this case social welfare programmes being the carrot and the persecutory Anti-Socialist Law introduced in 1878 being the stick, Bismarck sought to eliminate the Socialist party as a revolutionary force and integrate the labouring classes into state and society (Barmeyer, 2002). Piven and Cloward would likely agree with this critical observation, when they ascribe a cyclical pattern to relief-giving: “Historical evidence suggests that relief arrangements are initiated or expanded during the occasional outbreaks of civil disorder produced by mass unemployment, and are then abolished or contracted when political stability is restored. We shall argue that expansive relief policies are designed to mute civil disorder, and restrictive ones to reinforce work norms. In other words, relief policies are cyclical — liberal or restrictive depending on the problems of regulation in the larger society with which government must contend” (Piven & Cloward, 1993, p. xiii). They challenge the perspective, that welfare is primarily the result of benevolence, as well as the point of view that relief policies are set on a trajectory that will naturally become more “responsible, humane and generous”. They argue, that “[...] social welfare activity has not greatly aided the poor, precisely because the poor ordinarily have little influence on government”. And further: “the historical pattern [of relief programs] is clearly not one of progressive liberalization; it is rather a record of periodically expanding and contracting relief rolls as the system performs its two main functions: maintaining civil order and enforcing work” (Piven & Cloward, 1993, p. xv). One should therefore proceed with caution, when considering the functions of the welfare state primarily to be “shaped by morality” (Piven & Cloward, 1993, p. xvi). Similarly, Taylor-Gooby (2016, p. 713) paraphrases Offe (1984) on this “contradictory nature of welfare state capitalism”, when pointing out the need to discuss “the interlinkages between economic structure, class interests and ideas at both the level of elite paradigms of political economy and the level of popular ideologies, so that capitalism finds the welfare state both a challenge (by endorsing state interventions against liberal market capitalism) and an essential means of sustaining that system (by legitimating it and mitigating destructive class pressures)”.

Social policies can also play an enormous role in unifying or dividing groups of people. “Where Bismarck tried to prevent the development of a common employee interest, the Swedish social democrats used the reverse strategy: by pooling the wage earners and the salaried employees in the same risk pool a common class identity – that was hoped to be social democratic – was to be created” (Gøsta Esping-Andersen 1985 as paraphrased by Kangas and Palme, 2005, p. 24). These loyalties and bonds may have important consequences for the distribution of power in society. In a similar fashion, Taylor-Gooby (2016, p. 729), accuses the British government of “seeking to change the direction of the welfare state in the UK from an engine of social cohesion to one of social division in order to implement difficult policies by favouring supportive groups and directing highly visible cuts to non-supporters.” Recognising these as important aspects of social policy can provide powerful arguments in

favour of universalism in order to strengthen social cohesion. Furthermore, if (almost) everyone stands to benefit from a policy, it would supposedly enjoy widespread support and positive lobbying rather than be subjected to the day-to-day politics of competing clientelism.

BIEN's Definition of Basic Income

Basic income advocates seem to be aware of this potential for social control and many of them have in mind safeguarding recipients against it, as is evident from the definition by the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN): "A Basic Income is a periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all on an individual basis, without means-test or work requirement" (Basic Income Earth Network, 2022). They further identify five key characteristics of Basic Income:

- 1. Periodic—It is paid at regular intervals (for example every month), not as a one-off grant.
- 2. Cash payment—It is paid in an appropriate medium of exchange, allowing those who receive it to decide what they spend it on. It is not, therefore, paid either in kind (such as food or services) or in vouchers dedicated to a specific use.
- 3. Individual—It is paid on an individual basis—and not, for instance, to households.
- 4. Universal—It is paid to all, without means test.
- 5. Unconditional—It is paid without a requirement to work or to demonstrate willingness-to-work.

An emancipatory basic income that would be difficult to exploit for social control ought to adhere by BIEN's definition to be universal, in that it is not subject to a means test, paid out to rich and poor alike, and unconditional in that it is obligation-free and not subjected to a willingness to work. It is "the joint operation of these two features that turns basic income into a paramount instrument of freedom" (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, p. 16).

Basic Income is Vulnerable to Misinterpretation

There is, however, the issue that not everyone who refers to Basic Income adheres by these definitions. In an explanatory comment about BIEN's definition of UBI, Toru Yamamori admits, that "BIEN's formal documents (either online or not) have sometimes been helpless to correct misunderstandings or misuses of the term by some media, politicians, activists, opponents, etc. Especially for recent several years, as mainstream media and politics started to pay more attention to a basic income, the misunderstanding and confusion has become greater" (Yamamori, T., 2016). This statement has gained considerable traction in the wake of recent events. "The onset of the 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic led to a marked increase in positive discussion of Universal Basic Income (UBI) in political and media circles. [...] Preferences for UBI were stronger for pandemic times than for normal times. This was partially explained by a number of perceived advantages, such as simplicity of administration and suitability for a changing world. [...] Our results illustrate how a changing social and economic situation can bring about markedly different policy preferences, through changes

in citizens' perceptions of what is currently important" (Nettle, Johnson, Johnson, & Saxe, 2021, p. 1). Suddenly, everyone seems to be talking about Universal Basic Income. Unfortunately, non-experts run the risk of muddling up terminology. For example, in Spring 2020, under the impression of closed businesses and great uncertainty, Spain's minister for economic affairs Nadia Calvino announced the implementation of the ingreso mínimo vital ("Minimum Living Income"), which was widely mislabelled as a UBI (Forbes, 2020), while in reality it is a conditional and means-tested scheme (Rincon, L., 2020). Similarly, Kanni Wignaraja, in her capacity as Assistant Secretary-General to the United Nations along with Balazs Horvath, Chief Economist for the United Nations Development Programme section Asia-Pacific, published an article for the World Economic Forum (WEF) with the title: "Universal basic income is the answer to the inequalities exposed by COVID-19" (World Economic Forum, 2020). In the article, they make a powerful case for how Universal Basic Income could soften the blow dealt by economic repercussions related to the pandemic. However, the following statement is rather revealing: "[...] [G]ood arguments can be made for having very selective conditions – for instance, some that relate to public goods, like vaccinating all children and ensuring they attend school. Such selective conditions would not undermine the main purpose of eliminating poverty and allow low-income people to take calculated risks, to try to lift themselves out of poverty".

Moral Implications for the Use of Social Control

While these considerations are presumably based on the best intentions, they nonetheless illustrate the desire, displayed by some policymakers, to use basic income as a tool to execute social control over people. Many arguments can be made to justify the necessity for effective tools in the hands of policymakers. A speed camera would be unlikely to have any effect on regulating speed if the government could not enforce fines resulting of speeding. And a lot of people will likely consider speeding as something so dangerous that they would welcome disciplinary measures (albeit grudgingly). However, there is also a danger here that a ruling coalition (including democratically elected) will exploit such tools in order to subjugate minorities (or majorities), perceived as not being part of the in-group. Widerquist argues, that all social arrangements will necessarily create insider-outsider problems. A ruling coalition committed to justice will take steps to integrate as many individuals as possible and will strive to achieve legitimacy. However, "[t]he assumption that those efforts are completely successful is dangerous" (Widerquist, 2019, p. 3). He argues, that it is a slippery slope for anyone to bring about a social structure to which "no one could reasonably reject" (Scanlon, 1998), and thus ultimately decide what is reasonable and what is just. When that happens, it becomes inherently treacherous to distinguish between, what Widerquist calls, "recalcitrants" or "intransigents" (i.e. people with unreasonable objections) and legitimate dissenters. In this vein, an alleged "unreasonableness" could be used as an excuse to oppress legitimate objectors to the social structure. For, if the ruling coalition is reasonable (or considers itself to be), conversely all objectors are unreasonable (Widerquist, 2019, p. 3). A perceived moral righteousness is all too often a prerequisite for committing great evils. Or, paraphrasing Blaise Pascal, the worst decisions are usually made with a good conscience.

As we have seen here, there is a certain ambiguity to how the term Universal Basic Income

is being used, and it can mean very different things to different people. But compromising on the unconditional and obligation-free characteristics would transform basic income into a mere conditional cash transfer (CCT), far removed from the original idea. While there may be an argument for social control, not everyone will agree with it. For instance, Widerquist quotes Joseph Raz (1986), who argues favourably of coercion under certain conditions: “Since individuals are guaranteed adequate rights of political participation in the liberal state and since such a state is guided by a public morality expressing concern for individual autonomy, its coercive measures do not express an insult to the autonomy of individuals” (p. 157). In response to this, Widerquist argues: “This argument seems a little too trusting. Just because the stated goal of democracy is concern for individual autonomy, doesn’t mean the actual goal is, and even if the actual goal of the majority that controls the state is the promotion of autonomy does not mean that its conception of it accords with conceptions by various minorities, and it cannot insure that their concerns will not be ignored” (Widerquist, 2004, p. 11). Although not a democratic example, communist regimes ostensibly worked towards creating a workers’ paradise. Continuously using this visionary end to justify even the most horrendous means. And modern democracies, likewise, increasingly champion utilitarian principles with calls for solidarity or the greater good, chipping away at individual autonomy that is a fundamental element in a liberal democracy.

Bearing that in mind, what level of cumulative power in the hands of the ruling coalition would be desirable for a society that ascribes itself liberal and democratic values? The Romans, although having had an ambiguous understanding of democracy, celebrated Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus for relinquishing the dictatorial powers that were allegedly awarded to him in a time of crisis, after the threat had ended (Ratcliff & Vescio, 2013). The fact that he is still being remembered for his feat is illustrative for the rareness of his actions in history. Powers, once acquired, are seldom willingly returned. This is arguably true for authoritarian as well as democratic states. And social policy, in turn, contains great potential power to exert social control.

Emphasising the Unconditionality of UBI

The most commonly used term, when talking about the concept at hand, is: Universal Basic Income, or simply Basic Income. Van Parijs and Vanderborght repeat in their recent book their plea, that it is “crucial” that a Basic Income scheme “should be unconditional in a strong interpretation of the adjective” (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, p. 8). When using the term basic income, they understand it to be individual, universal and obligation free. This strong emphasis on unconditional is much stronger in some languages, other than English. The most commonly used German denomination, for example, is: *Bedingungsloses Grundeinkommen* (“Unconditional Basic Income”). Similarly in Spanish, there exists the designation *Renta Básica Incondicional* (RBI) (“Unconditional Basic Income”), although the term *Renta Básica Universal* (RBU) (“Universal Basic Income”) is also being used.

As was briefly illustrated here, there is an acute danger that widespread and growing public support for UBI may be harnessed by political and private actors to introduce a mislabeled version of conditional cash transfers (CCTs) that would expand governments’ ability to exercise social control. In order to forestall ongoing attempts to renege on this

essential aspect of UBI and avoid public misapprehension, and ultimately deception, this article argues in favour of adding the acronym unconditional to UBI, making it UUBI. Some scholars have already begun referring to it in this way (see, for example, Bruun and Duka, 2018).

Since this is a paper about basic income, it is important to stress that social control is by no means a sole peculiarity of it. Amongst critics, there is sometimes a tendency to make UBI responsible for problems that already exist today. And of course, conditional cash transfers (CCTs) are already being used to discipline recipients and attempt to nudge or coerce them to engage in a certain behaviour. Peter Hartz, who spearheaded the commission to design and implement the polarising Hartz reforms in Germany, laments that the end result of the reforms turned out to be “a system to discipline and punish the unemployed” (Hartz & Kloepper, 2007). And Austria previously has threatened to cut off unemployment-benefits to recipients who have to turn down a job offer for not being vaccinated against COVID-19 (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2021). Brazil likewise made certain vaccinations mandatory in order to receive welfare benefits from the Bolsa Familia program (Rio Times Online, 2023). The implications of coercing people into undergoing a medical treatment against their will are vast, and political backlash has manifested itself in mass protests and widespread alienation between the state and many of its citizens, the world over. It exemplifies a dilemma that is outlined as the insider-outsider problem above and there does not seem to be an obvious, straightforward solution. The problem is such that it is impossible to definitely determine whether an objection is reasonable or not. And advantaged people might just convince themselves that the objections of disadvantaged people are unreasonable. Widerquist draws from social contract theory and suggests that “[...] the ultimate mechanism we have for ensuring reasonableness simply asks the ruling coalition to be the judge in their own case. Don’t tell the disadvantaged when their last reasonable objection has been eliminated. They’ll tell you. Until then, respect their position. Ask as little from them as you possibly can” (Widerquist, 2019, p. 9).

Would this include refraining from (financially) punishing those who refuse to cooperate with demands made by the state? Depending where one stands on a given issue, it might be tempting to argue in favour of awarding the state such tools to exercise social control. But this stance might come back as a boomerang, when one might suddenly find oneself to be the outsider on a different issue. Following Widerquist’s “second-best approach to the insider-outsider problem” would probably mean minimising how a social policy tool, such as basic income, could be used to exercise power over recipients. Pettit chimes in with a republican perspective, that “[u]nreasoned control – henceforth, called ‘control’ – may be exercised through interference, such as when others remove an option, replace it with a penalized alternative, or reduce my capacity to choose rationally, whether by exploiting a weakness or inducing false beliefs” (Pettit, 2008, p. 4). However, “liberty requires nondomination. [...] My freedom will consist in that protected and empowered status” (Pettit, 2008, p. 4). These arguments may be used to bolster the call to emphasise the unconditionality aspect of UBI. Especially when factoring in current events.

Lockdown Policies constitute a Break with Traditional Work Ethics

One could argue that the implementation of drastic restrictions of personal liberties in order to halt the spread of infectious diseases, which began in 2020, constitutes a paradigm change regarding the relationship between the state and its citizens. Many people, the world over, were suddenly forbidden to engage in gainful employment. This applied also to people who had had successful businesses up until then. Suddenly, they found themselves in a situation in which they had to rely on the government for financial support. Many businesses went under, chief among them, brick and mortar stores in the inner cities which were forced shut by government mandate. It is possible that some of those, whose businesses went bankrupt, for lack of livelihood turned to employers such as Amazon, which had been allowed to continue delivering to people's homes and managed to drastically improve their market share in 2020 (New York Times, 2021). The "hiring spree without equal" (New York Times, 2020), the company subsequently experienced, may have included many job seekers who had previously been autonomous. This may have been the direct result of government intervention and affected many people who became destitute through no fault of their own.¹

Widerquist (2004, p. 5) argues, that writers even as long ago as the Eighteenth Century linked access to external assets to an individual's freedom quoting, among others, Rousseau: "It is impossible to enslave a man without first putting him in a situation where he cannot do without another man, and since such a situation does not exist in the state of nature, each man there is free of this yoke (Rousseau 1984, p. 106)". And further, that "servitude is the inherent result of the monopolization of natural resources by a portion of the population" (Rousseau 1984, pp. 119-120 as paraphrased by Widerquist (2004)). If lockdown policies henceforth come to be regarded as an acceptable government tool², this may drastically increase the amount of people who will in the future have to rely on the government for financial support or turn to large conglomerates for employment. Traditionally, the parts of society that relied on cash transfers constituted a minority. If a majority of citizens were to become dependant in this way, this would have far-reaching consequences for the freedom of citizens within liberal democracies. In such a scenario, the design of a basic income – emancipatory or paternalistic – would probably depend on how the general public feels about these developments. Would they consider basic income as a generous charity provided to them in challenging times, or as compensation for external assets denied to them with which they could have satisfied their own needs and wants through their own efforts (Widerquist, 2004). Implications are vast. If basic income were designed to be anything other than an instrument of freedom – a real possibility – this may have profound negative consequences.

The Uncertain Future of Cash and Basic Income Implications

The BIEN basic income key characteristic number two, cash payment (see list above), is also something that will have to be emphasised in contemporary basic income debates. According to the BIEN definition, it is to be paid "in an appropriate medium of exchange, allowing those who receive it to decide what they spend it on". This might come in conflict with current plans to expand Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs). A full-fledged digital currency would allow whoever controls it to specify how it can be spent. Critics point out, that "CBDCs could give governments a powerful tool for economic and social control and unprecedented

intrusion into the private financial lives of billions of people. Some authoritarian regimes and developing countries have already embraced digitized currencies while banning or discouraging nongovernmental cryptocurrencies” (Jossey, P.H., 2022).

India, for example, “has launched a mobile payment platform designed to efficiently deliver government benefits and limit the misuse of funds dispensed through the country’s social welfare system” (Nikkei Asia, 2021). This allows the government to control what welfare recipients spend the money on. Kaori Iwasaki, senior economist at the Japan Research Institute explains, that “[w]elfare money deposited in a bank account could be used for gambling, for example, which does not fulfil the original purpose, E-RUPI can raise the effectiveness of social insurance and other payments” (Nikkei Asia, 2021). Similarly, the Australian government is testing a cashless debit card for welfare recipients in which eighty percent of welfare is cashless (the rest in cash). The card cannot be used to take out cash, gamble or buy alcohol. Participation is not entirely voluntary: “Cashless Debit Card participants are able to exit the program where they can demonstrate reasonable and responsible management of their affairs, including financial affairs. Applications to exit are considered on a case-by-case basis [...]” (Department of Social Services of the Australian Government, 2022). Likewise, Germany is testing such a debit card for asylum seekers and considers expanding its use to recipients of social aid (Welt Online, 2024). The reasoning behind such programmes is the same one that has led to the creation of food stamps and in-kind support. It is based on an underlying assumption, that those with the money know best how it ought to be spent. Unrestricted “[c]ash transfers are a direct challenge to the traditional belief, explicit or at least subconscious, that impoverished people are at least partly responsible for their plight” (Hanlon, Barrientos, & Hulme, 2010). Most proponents of basic income advocate for incomes to be paid out in cash instead. “Most fundamentally, a priority placed on achieving greater freedom for all carries with it a general presumption in favor of cash distribution, with no restriction as to the object or timing of its spending. This leaves the beneficiary free to decide how to use it, thus allowing individual preferences to prevail among the various options available even with a modest budget. It is no coincidence that the clearest and most general form of minimum income provided in kind is to be found in prisons” (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, p. 13).

The Spread of China’s Social Credit Score System to Other Parts of the World?

A digital currency that determines what people can buy is a powerful tool for social control. It is also an essential part of schemes such as the social credit score (SCS) in China. A social credit score “is framed as a set of mechanisms providing rewards or punishments as feedback to actors, based not just on the lawfulness, but also the morality of their actions, covering economic, social and political conduct” (Creemers, 2018, p. 2). “A punishment/reward system based on credit scores will determine whether citizens and organizations are able to access things like education, markets, and tax deductions” (Liang, Das, Kostyuk, & Hussain, 2018, p. 1). “Although Western governments have also explored using reputation technologies and mechanisms in governance and social control contexts, China’s [SCS], as a comprehensive, singularly framed, and actively implemented policy project, knows no equivalent elsewhere in

the world [...]” (Dai, 2018, p. 1).

Notwithstanding that, tentative steps towards such a system are currently being taken in Europe as well. Rome, for instance, as part of its efforts to become a smart city, has implemented a digital incentive system. “The Citizen Wallet is a rewarding platform that encourages virtuous behaviours implemented by city users, aimed at improving the environmental, social and economic sustainability of the city, in line with the objectives of the Agenda 2030 [of the United Nations]” (City of Rome, 2022). Likewise, the Austrian capital Vienna is working on its very own cultural token. Essentially, the “Kultur-Token is an app that rewards citizens of the City of Vienna for sustainable mobility behaviors. It encourages low-carbon mobility choices with tokens exchangeable for free access to local cultural offers” (Foster, Lamura, & Hackel, 2020). Several other European cities and regions are pursuing similar projects.

At the time of writing, the schemes only foresee incentives in the form of rewards and no punishments. But once in place, with everyone participating, it is not difficult to imagine how the system could be seamlessly converted into a social credit score like in China in which unalienable rights might come to be regarded as privileges. The controversial vaccination-passport, first introduced in many countries around the world in 2021, has already set a new precedent for how non-compliance may result in denial of access to venues, travel restrictions and even job loss. The EU commission is currently funding a project at the University of Vienna with the title: Engineering a Trustworthy Society: The Evolution, Perception and Impact of China’s Social Credit System, in which they seek to better understand “the system of governance the Chinese government promotes as a viable alternative to liberal democracy” (Steinhardt H.C., 2021).

Given these developments, perhaps it would be an appropriate time to engage in a large-scale public debate on whether people in the West (and elsewhere) wish to make a transition towards something akin to the Chinese system or would rather live in liberal democracies. For critics point out that the emancipatory and participatory potential and promises of tracking technologies threaten to tilt into a social control between “new solidarity” and an “erosion of solidarity” and surveillance, in which technology would awaken and enhance the primarily economic and commercial interests of third parties involved (Nosthoff und Maschewski 2019; Rode 2019); thus revealing the “authoritarian dimension of digital self-measurement” (Krüger 2021) as paraphrased from (Ellerich-Groppe, 2021, transl. by author) .

What does Basic Income have to do with that?

Many of the issues discussed here exist today and are only in part projections of the future. One may therefore argue, that they are unrelated to basic income, which does not currently exist anywhere in the world. As in, not the fault of UBI. This is certainly true. However, there is nonetheless a good argument to be made as to why critics and proponents of basic income alike should consider these issues in relation to basic income design. As we have seen, in conventional welfare states, governments can exercise tremendous social control over those who depend on cash transfers. But the amount of people in this dependent position is limited. They constitute a minority. If basic income were to be introduced, this would change. Everyone would receive it. Initially, for a majority, it might be no more than a bonus.

Something they are happy to use but not something they absolutely rely on for their livelihoods. But, “[s]hould the job-automation trends continue as predicted by many researchers, they could lead to a massive worker displacement, increased income inequality, and the creation of a permanent, unemployable ‘underclass’ (Gordon, 2013; Kristal & Cohen, 2015; Smith & Anderson, 2014)” (Choi & Kang, 2019). Job displacement need not be a bad thing. A future that is less centred around work could be a blessing, for so long as it does not permanently disenfranchise people from political participation.

However, critics such as Heath argue that a UBI will never be high enough because it would continuously increase economic inequality between those who stop and those who continue working. He comes from a perspective in which taking on paid employment, or not, is mostly a choice and poses relevant questions about the relative nature of where to draw the line regarding what constitutes an adequate standard of living (Heath, 2024). But what if, in an automated future, there is very little paid work left? Many futurists consider this to be a reasonable scenario. “There are large areas of the economy that will be affected by [rapid artificial intelligence (AI) development] and the skills needed to manage the AIs will be highly specialized and out of the reach of 95 percent of people. This will be very socially divisive. As power shifts from labor to capital, inequality will increase and social stability will decrease” (Smith & Anderson, 2014, p. 54).

Should unfolding events resemble such predictions, a lot of people might have to rely exclusively on cash transfers, such as basic income. This could spell out as a dystopian scenario in which people’s basic needs are covered but they are shunned from any real agency that would enable them to lead the lives they might wish to. Resembling a slum or a refugee camp, where people are forced to spend their days queuing for food or scrambling for building material. Once human beings cease to be relevant as workers and consumers, it is not difficult to imagine that a purely economics-centred system would seek to discard them. Worse even, if political power would continue to be closely linked to personal wealth, they’d be mostly excluded from political participation. This is arguably already the case today. A large-scale contemporary study concerning itself with inequality and political participation in the United States from 2014 concluded: “Despite the seemingly strong empirical support in previous studies for theories of majoritarian democracy, our analyses suggest that majorities of the American public actually have little influence over the policies our government adopts. Americans do enjoy many features central to democratic governance, such as regular elections, freedom of speech and association, and a widespread (if still contested) franchise. But we believe that if policymaking is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans, then America’s claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened” (Gilens & Page, 2014, p. 577). Therefore, “[a]ny serious pursuit of social integration must include guarantees against entrapment in deprivation” (Esping-Andersen, Gallie, Hemerijck, Myles, et al., 2002, p. 22). In light of this, many arguments will likely be made about work policies that are meant to ensure that there will be enough jobs left, for example, by providing job guarantees. But that would probably just result in undesirable busy work and would not really solve anything.

Basic income could be the tool that converts the terrifying thought of a jobless future into a desirable post-work utopia in which people are motivated by things other than (just) money.³ However, if people, who wished to take on gainful employment, were denied that possibility, and compensated with a basic income, this opens up a whole new philosophical

debate. In that case (or in any case), a basic income would probably have to be designed in a way that would essentially redistribute most revenue, in order to avoid a neo-feudal system in which very few people owned everything. “The kind of starkly unequal society that [...] futurists fear wouldn’t just come about because the robots arrived – it would come about because only a few people owned them” (Battistoni, 2017). Hence, there ought to be a focus on lasting redistribution. Laín sees this potential, when he states: “Basic income is an economic policy with a huge redistributive capacity, which is even greater than that of retirement pensions and unemployment benefits” (Laín, 2021).

Would UBI Redistribute Wealth?

In this vein, Bruun and Duuka envision a form of basic income in “response to a potential technological outcome, in which society’s problems become more about the distribution of wealth rather than scarcity” (Bruun & Duka, 2018). On a similar notion, Autor states, that: “If machines were in fact to make human labor superfluous, we would have vast aggregate wealth but a serious challenge in determining who owns it and how to share it. One might presume that with so much wealth at hand, distribution would be relatively straightforward to resolve. But history suggests that this prediction never holds true” (Autor, 2015, p. 28). However, the authors of the World Inequality Report 2022 point out the urgency of necessary redistribution. “We stress at the outset that addressing the challenges of the 21st century is not feasible without significant redistribution of income and wealth inequalities. The rise of modern welfare states in the 20th century, which was associated with tremendous progress in health, education, and opportunities for all [...], was linked to the rise of steep progressive taxation rates. This played a critical role in order to ensure the social and political acceptability of increased taxation and socialization of wealth. A similar evolution will be necessary in order to address the challenges of the 21st century” (Chancel, Piketty, Saez, Zucman, et al., 2021, p. 20). They go on to argue that while nations have become richer, governments have become poorer. “Over the past 40 years, countries have become significantly richer, but their governments have become significantly poorer. The share of wealth held by public actors is close to zero or negative in rich countries, meaning that the totality of wealth is in private hands. This trend has been magnified by the Covid crisis, during which governments borrowed the equivalent of 10–20% of GDP, essentially from the private sector. The currently low wealth of governments has important implications for state capacities to tackle inequality in the future, as well as the key challenges of the 21st century such as climate change” (Chancel et al., 2021, p. 15).

In the face of this, a deviant observation may be that redistribution does indeed already occur on a large scale – the nature of its flow direction just being rather lopsided: from the bottom to the top, instead of the other way round. Within rentier capitalism, giving money to the poor might really be giving money to the rich. For the poor will use the money to pay their landlords and most of them will buy their food at large conglomerates. In an era in which enormous asset management firms such as BlackRock, Vanguard or StateStreet are invested in virtually all major publicly traded companies, the world has come to resemble one big company town in which most wages are spent on company housing and in company stores. Therefore, most of that money spent, will end up flowing back to the top. In this vein, charity

for the poor could really be considered as a delayed charity for the rich. “A new billionaire has been created every 26 hours since the pandemic began. The world’s 10 richest men have doubled their fortunes, while over 160 million people are projected to have been pushed into poverty” (Ahmed et al., 2022, p. 7). These events have coincided with a time of unprecedented government handouts in the form of furlough schemes, emergency monies for workers and bailouts. Admittedly, a correlation of these events does not prove causality. But these observations merit increased attention. Even more so, because these issues appear to constitute a certain blind spot: “Scholars and politicians have been puzzled by the lack of popular concern about the rising level of income inequality across the West” (Mijs, 2021, p. 11).

In light of an ever-growing disparity between the well-off and the rest, a truly redistributive basic income would therefore have to find the necessary funds at the top end of this cycle and reinsert them at the bottom. This observation, if accurate, makes basic income models based on, for example, consumer tax, questionable. Impoverished governments and the struggling workforce will hardly be able to stem the cost of a basic income, something critics relentlessly point out. But that is due to the fact, that the Wealth of Nations is nowadays to be found elsewhere, namely in the concentration of capital in the hands of a select few. However, Battistoni (2017) points out that Andy Stern, the former head of a large labour union in the US, in his 2016 book, *Raising the Floor*, cautions against a “soak the rich” approach, because this would prevent the broad political coalition necessary to implement UBI by alienating the rich from the start. This is a valid concern. Would a basic income that does indeed go against billionaire interests be feasible? This sentiment is shared by Gourevitch. Wary of basic income for various reasons, he also argues, that it would be difficult to attain the kind of UBI, that its idealistic proponents envision, in the current political climate: “any basic income high enough to threaten existing relations of economic domination would likely only be feasible if there were already a substantial movement among workers” (Gourevitch, 2016, p. 25). For, “[t]he balance between job conservation and technological progress [...], to a large extent, reflects the balance of power in society, and how gains from technological progress are being distributed” (Frey & Osborne, 2017, p. 256). But would a basic income that does not go against the interests of the very wealthy, by redistributing existing wealth, be worth having?

Inequality and Democracy: A contradiction?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau argues in his *Social Contract*, that “the end [as in purpose] of every system of legislation” consists of “two main objects, liberty and equality – liberty, because all particular dependence means so much force taken from the body of the State, and equality, because liberty cannot exist without it” (Rousseau, 1762, p. 39). His concept of civil liberty, as opposed to “natural liberty, which is bounded only by the strength of the individual [...] is limited by the general will; and possession [...]” (Rousseau, 1762, p. 15). Whereas, “by equality, we should understand, not that the degrees of power and riches are to be absolutely identical for everybody; but that power shall never be great enough for violence, and shall always be exercised by virtue of rank and law; and that, in respect of riches, no citizen shall ever be wealthy enough to buy another, and none poor enough to be forced to sell himself.”

(p. 39) He further warns that failing to “allow neither rich men nor beggars” will be “fatal to the common good; from the one come the friends of tyranny, and from the other tyrants” (Rousseau, 1762, p. 115). Evidently, the engine that is meant to keep things fairly equitable in a democracy is stuttering. This observation may appear counter-intuitive at first glance. “[...] [T]he notion that inequality should be at least partially self-correcting in a democracy has a long pedigree in economic theory” (Bonica, McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2013, p. 103). This is based on the assumption that “new inequalities have primarily benefited the top 1 percent and even the top .01 percent. These groups seem sufficiently small that economic inequality could be held in check by political equality in the form of ‘one person, one vote’” (Bonica et al., 2013, p. 103). In reality, however, this form of political self-correction does not seem to unfold and is likely a variation of Hume’s paradox: “Nothing appears more surprising to those, who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and the implicit submission, with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers.” The paradox now being, that opinion seemingly trumps sheer force. “When we enquire by what means this wonder is effected, we shall find, that, as FORCE is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is therefore, on opinion only that that government is founded” (Hume, 1777).

In turn, a dissolution of Hume’s paradox, through changing societal values, could potentially lead to policies that would be favourable for redistribution from top to bottom. Something that is desperately needed. “Ideological predilections aside, it should be evident to all that we cannot afford not to be egalitarians in the advanced economies of the twenty-first century” (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002, p. 4). These may be radical considerations. Radical in the true sense of the word in that they aim to address the root issues. And they can be defended. “For a start, resources do not belong to any country or individual. Private property is established (or should be established) only insofar as it serves the general interest, within the framework of a balanced set of institutions and rights limiting individual build-up of wealth and achieving a better distribution of wealth” (Chancel et al., 2021, p. 173f). The authors admit, that doing so is not a simple task, and finding and establishing a common standard of justice is complex. “But alternatives, such as making sacrosanct the market and the absolute respect of property rights acquired in the past (whatever their scale or origin), are only inconsistent arrangements aimed at perpetuating injustices and unfounded positions of power, ultimately only preparing for new crises.”

The fact that such an excess in the private accumulation of wealth has been possible in the first place raises fundamental questions about the performance of modern capitalist democracies. This may be explained in part because a capitalist democracy can be considered as an oxymoron. As argued by Mausfeld, who observes in the foreword to the German version of Wolin’s *Inverted Totalitarianism*: “Democracy is based on the ideal of equality, when it comes to communising power. The functional principle of capitalism, on the other hand, is rooted in the inequality of who owns the means of production. The capitalist property theory demands, that those who have no capital of their own must work for someone else, and thus transforms their work into wage labour. Capitalism, therefore, demands a submission under a power structure in which a minority of property owners has power over a majority of propertyless. In this vein, the term ‘capitalist democracy’ becomes a contradiction. An attempt has been made, over the past century, by means of political thought, to address this

objection by slowly shifting the meaning of democracy and now de-facto considers 'capitalist democracies' to be a form of elite rule that is legitimised by elections. Capitalist democracies are therefore also referred to as 'elite democracies', which constitutes a conceptual contradiction in itself" (Wolin, 2022, transl. by author).

Fending off the Pitchforks: Support for Basic Income from Unexpected Actors

One need not be a Marxist to recognise that there is likely an element of truth in the famous statement made by Marx and Engels: "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas; i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling 'intellectual' force" (Marx & Engels, 1845). Supposing, for the sake of the argument, that this is indeed the case, perhaps some scepticism is in order when looking at who has in recent years joined the ranks of UBI supporters. "Technology entrepreneurs, including SpaceX founder Elon Musk, as well as Facebook founders Chris Hughes and Mark Zuckerberg, have endorsed the universal basic income as a potential social policy solution to occupational risks from automation (see Hughes 2018)" (Dermont & Weisstanner, 2020, p. 2). Also, a range of Silicon Valley type companies are funding basic income experiments all over the world. From the perspective of UBI supporters, it may be reassuring to have such prominent advocates with extensive funding potential on their side, and they are likely welcomed with open arms. And indeed, the ideological ambiguity of basic income, with champions of the idea coming from both the right and the left, has a long antecedent. But sceptics demur, that "UBI's cross-ideological appeal is the bug, not the feature" (Battistoni, 2017). Arguing, that basic income has the potential to serve as a "Trojan horse" for both left and right. Critics warn that it could dismantle what is left of the welfare state and replace it with a pittance, while supporters claim it could drastically enhance the agency of non-property-owning classes. Be that as it may, the "version of basic income we get will depend, more than policies with a clearer ideological valence, on the political forces that shape it" (Battistoni, 2017).

As we have seen, there seems to be increasing support for ideas such as basic income. And not just from ordinary citizens, but also from the very rich. This development may likely exacerbate, as repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis are becoming clearer. Inequality, which was already staggering in 2019, has grown considerably in recent years. The investment bank Credit Suisse asserts: "The indices all agree that global wealth inequality rose in 2020 by a substantial amount [...] the inequality rise in 2020 was significantly greater than that recorded in any year this century" (Shorrocks, Davies, & Lluberas, 2021). Oxfam, an NGO committed to ending hunger, calculates that "[i]f the 10 richest men spent a million dollars each a day, it would take them 414 years to spend their combined wealth" (Ahmed et al., 2022, p. 9). And the World Inequality Lab states, that "[t]he poorest half of the global population barely owns any wealth at all, possessing just 2% of the total. In contrast, the richest 10% of the global population own 76% of all wealth" (Chancel et al., 2021, p. 10). Growing levels of inflation and higher prices for gas and oil are making it increasingly difficult for even many members of the global middle class to make ends meet. It may only be a matter of time until a simmering discontent about inequality turns into a wildfire. Anecdotal events may perhaps serve as a precursor of changing attitudes toward the

billionaire class. A speech about the fragility of Earth made by Jeff Bezos, owner of Amazon, at the UN's Climate Summit at the COP26 caused outrage and indignation among many observers. The speech was made, following a brief trip into space, after which Bezos gave thanks with the words: "I want to thank every Amazon employee, and every Amazon customer because you guys paid for all this [...]" (Head Topics Canada, 2021). Some observers called his behaviour a "Marie Antoinette moment" (Huffington Post, 2021), likening it to the Queen's infamous "let them eat cake" statement, which she may or may not have said after being told that her peasant subjects did not have any bread to eat. Thus, pointing out hypocrisy related to space travel and environmentalism, as well as an indelicate disregard for the very far-removed living realities of Amazon employees. Surrounding these events, there has even been a satirical online petition, advocating not to allow Jeff Bezos to return to Earth, which was signed by more than two-hundred-thousand people (Change.org, 2021). Observations such as this one may suggest that the social order is becoming increasingly volatile. And the exorbitantly rich naturally stand to lose if there were to be any events resembling a revolution or changing attitudes on property rights. This is also being recognised by billionaires themselves. One of them published an article in Politico Magazine, in which he warned that, if "we [plutocrats] don't do something to fix the glaring inequities in this economy, the pitchforks are going to come for us. No society can sustain this kind of rising inequality. In fact, there is no example in human history where wealth accumulated like this and the pitchforks didn't eventually come out. You show me a highly unequal society, and I will show you a police state. Or an uprising" (Politico, 2014).

Drawing from Piven and Cloward's cycle argument, liberal or restrictive depending on current needs, a looming danger of civil disorder may therefore serve to explain the growing interest of many oligarchs in basic income. This in itself would not constitute a problem. If it were not for the misgivings that a lifeline could also turn into bondage, once civil society backlash has been quelled. Some may argue this to be a cynical point of view. But in response to this, one could object that it would be naive to negate that there are indeed conflicting interests between the billionaire class and the rest. Would the former really support a policy that would permanently diminish both their wealth and their power? Or would they embrace a basic income design that would neglect to address root issues such as inequality? "Historical examples demonstrate that upper-class people consistently claim social arrangements benefit everyone no matter how much the lower class suffers." For example, at some point, "[m]any people have claimed that slavery and extreme poverty are consistent with mutual advantage" (Widerquist, 2019, p. 7).

And the potential implications of the implementation of a basic income are so vast, that most people fail to fully recognise them. "The debate about basic income is about the obligations we have to one another, the origins of property, the ends of human life, the shape of our society. And when these broader visions are translated into policy, they don't simply suggest a shared plan to give people money – they offer drastically different accounts of how much money people should get, where it should come from, and who should get it" (Battistoni, 2017). And this is precisely where the importance of basic income design comes into play, and where the seemingly harmonious cooperation between basic income advocates with a social justice perspective and the billionaire class is going to be strained. Those who argue from a social justice perspective must be adamant about basic income characteristics. "[...] [N]ot just any income will do: for it to be a genuine step toward a post-work society, it

has to be genuinely universal and unconditional, provide enough income to actually live on, and supplement rather than replace the welfare state” (Battistoni, 2017).

Conclusion

The article has shown the potential for social control that is inherent to welfare policies. Following that, it has reiterated BIEN’s definition of UBI and how it is nonetheless vulnerable to misinterpretation by policymakers and media. In response to this, it recommended adding unconditional to the acronym UBI, making it UUBI to avoid confusion with conditional cash transfers (CCTs). The exercise of social control has complex moral implications. Its use is not limited to basic income but may be drastically enhanced by its implementation due to the fact that suddenly a majority (as opposed to a minority) might come to depend on government cash transfers. In an increasingly jobless future and/or the use of lockdown policies, this could theoretically turn currently autonomous actors into dependent ones. Additionally, the article has predicted that a clash with BIEN’s basic income characteristics may be expected if Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs) continue to be expanded, for this may undermine the proclaimed agency of cash recipients in how they spend the money in a possible future roll-out of basic income. The same is true for developments towards a social credit score resembling the one in China. Finally, the need for basic income to contribute to a redistribution of wealth was discussed, along with an observation that billionaire supporters of basic income may have reasons other than social justice for supporting the idea.

This critical dissection of basic income is not meant to make a case against it. It is rather a plea to make good use of contemporary events as “levers for emancipation”, while avoiding “breeding new forms of slavery” (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, p. 4). While the world stumbles from one crisis into the next, things may happen very fast and the basic income drawer has been half ajar for a long time now. Basic income might just come to be regarded as the right tool to fend off the (economic) enemies at the gate in the wake of tremendous societal disruption.

Many basic income proponents are disdainful of social control and sincerely hope that unconditional and universal, non-obligatory and means-based cash transfers would improve the real freedom and agency of the most disadvantaged, as well as that of a dwindling middle-class, which may ultimately determine the continuity of liberal democracies. But in order to allow this possibility, supporters need to be unwavering in their insistence on the fundamental characteristics of basic income as, for example, defined by BIEN. Failing that, a basic income light may well serve as a Trojan horse for diverging interests and lead to a grand expansion of governments’ ability to exercise social control. Especially so, because the unresolved conflict between labour and capital, that defined previous centuries, is already proving to continue to define the twenty-first. Basic income is not going to be a panacea, solving all the issues mentioned here but it could be a meaningful stepping stone. Forwards – or backwards – will depend on the rigour of its design.

¹ Although this is a treacherous argument to make because the idea of individual failure in a highly volatile economic environment that works in boom and bust cycles is almost certainly flawed.

- ² China, for example, still uses extensive lockdown policies in 2022, more than two years after the initial outbreak and the first usage of them as part of a “flatten-the-curve” strategy.
- ³ For example, Bregman sees working less as the solution to (almost) everything and asks: “Is there anything that working less does not solve?”, listing issues such as climate change, stress and unemployment (Bregman, 2017, p. 142).

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